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To cite this article: Brendan C. Walsh (2020): A Modern-Day Romantic: The Romantic Sublime in Hayao Miyazaki's Creative Philosophy, *Comparative Literature: East & West*

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2019.1710941>



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Published online: 20 Jan 2020.



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A Modern-Day Romantic: The Romantic Sublime in Hayao Miyazaki's Creative Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the concept of the Romantic sublime is presented within the filmography of acclaimed animator Hayao Miyazaki (1941-). Fronting the Japanese animation house Studio Ghibli from 1985, Miyazaki has developed into an auteur figure with his films attracting considerable attention from scholars. The films of Hayao Miyazaki are characterized by a consistent creative philosophy, a philosophy that this article contends is profoundly shaped by the esthetic, philosophical, and artistic traditions of the European Romantic movement. Miyazaki's engagement with Romanticism can be characterized by his interpretation of the Romantic sublime, a concept inherently linked to the traditions of the Romantic hero, the magical imagination, and the natural realm. This engagement with Romantic ideals is illustrated in this article by analyzing the thematic and visual elements of Miyazaki's films, highlighting how these particular films reflect, and embody, particular Romantic ideals. In studying these films through a conceptual framework of the Romantic sublime, this article provides a deeper insight into Hayao Miyazaki's creative philosophy.

摘要

本文探讨了浪漫主义崇高的概念是如何在著名动画师宫崎骏(1941-) 的电影中表现出来的。从1985年起, 宫崎骏就引领日本吉卜力动画工作室, 以其电影吸引了众多学者的关注, 演变成了一个导演形象。宫崎骏的电影具有始终如一的创作哲学。本文认为这种哲学是由欧洲浪漫主义运动的美学, 哲学和艺术传统深刻塑造的。宫崎骏与浪漫主义的交融体现在他对浪漫主义崇高的诠释上。这一概念与浪漫主义英雄的传统, 神奇的想象和自然王国有着内在的联系。本文通过分析宫崎骏电影的主题元素和视觉元素, 强调这些特定的电影如何反映和体现特定的浪漫主义理想, 以此阐明其与浪漫主义理想的结合。通过对这些电影的浪漫主义崇高的概念框架的研究, 本文对宫崎骏的创作哲学有了更深的理解。

KEYWORDS

Hayao Miyazaki; Studio Ghibli; animation; romanticism; sublime

关键词

宫崎骏; 吉卜力工作室; 动画; 浪漫主义; 崇高

1. Introduction

The sublime, as both an esthetic and philosophical notion, is one of the defining aspects of European Romanticism. Dating back to the Greco-Roman tradition, the sublime has endured over the centuries as it encapsulates a range of emotional experiences inherent to the human condition. While existing in many different incarnations across various

cultures and periods, it was only under the Romantics that the full transcendental phenomenon of the sublime was defined and articulated. When the sublime is invoked in modern art forms, it is the Romantic incarnation that holds sway. One of the most pertinent examples of this enduring legacy of the Romantic sublime is in the works of animator Hayao Miyazaki (1941-). Among the pantheon of animators, few figures command as much popular and scholarly attention as Hayao Miyazaki. Fronting the Japanese animation house Studio Ghibli from 1985, Miyazaki has been involved with some of the most critically acclaimed animated films in history. What sets the films of Studio Ghibli apart from other animated works is the underlying ideology. Miyazaki's films are characterized by a distinct creative philosophy, expressed not only through the characters or narrative, but also through Studio Ghibli's unique style of animation (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 153). At the center of this creative philosophy is Miyazaki's interpretation and presentation of the Romantic sublime: in all its many forms.

Miyazaki has been the subject of much scholarly analysis in the past few decades by a number of the leading animation scholars, but there has been relatively little written on this figure's creative philosophy. As Miyazaki has become more familiar to audiences in the West over the past two decades, the scholarship has developed alongside it. Scholars such as Susan Napier and Helen McCarthy have been at the forefront of this scholarship, examining the fundamental themes that underline Miyazaki's filmography. In recent years, Dani Cavallaro has emerged as the most prolific writer in this area. An impressive body of work on Miyazaki now exists, covering his animation techniques, creative process, and thematic concerns. However, the scholarship has not explicitly engaged with his creative philosophy; a philosophy that has been profoundly shaped by European Romanticism. Consequently, this paper addresses this gap in the scholarship by contextualizing Studio Ghibli's engagement with the Romantic sublime. It explores how the Romantic sublime is presented within Miyazaki's filmography, thereby identifying a defining aspect of Miyazaki's philosophy of artistic and creative expression. This is accomplished by analyzing the thematic and visual elements of Miyazaki's films, highlighting how these particular films reflect, and embody, Romantic ideals. Miyazaki is influenced by a number of different esthetic, artistic, and philosophical traditions of the Romantic sublime that he fashions into a coherent creative philosophy. Thus, the animator embodies the *spirit* of the Romantic sublime, rather than any one interpretation of this concept. Each of the sections in this paper examines the sublime as it is represented in a number of prominent Romantic tropes and traditions: the magical imagination, the Romantic hero, and natural (spiritual) landscapes. In framing Miyazaki's creative philosophy through the lens of Romanticism and the sublime, this paper establishes a fresh approach to the study of this figure that enables scholars to more effectively analyze his substantial body of work.

2. The sublime in romantic thought

The term "[Romanticism](#)" is problematic. European Romanticism emerged as a distinct philosophy in the 18th and 19th centuries, inspiring artists to produce some of the most influential art and literature of the modern era. This movement was far from unified though, existing rather as a series of overlapping schools of thought in Western Europe

that shared a common philosophical outlook. Interpretations of Romanticism as a coherent ideology have increasingly been challenged over the last few decades, yet the basic elements that have traditionally characterized the movement are still generally agreed upon in modern academic discourse (Day 4). This paper frames Romanticism as an intellectual movement that placed emphasis on individual artistic expressions of emotion and imagination, particularly focusing on humanity's relationship with nature and spirituality. Here, Romanticism is defined in broad terms primarily as an artistic movement underlined by an explicit spiritual and philosophical ideology. In turn, this definition is also shaped by the Romantic interpretation of the sublime. The interpretation of Romanticism in this paper is thus conceptualized primarily through the "historical" Romantic sublime, rather than through the many other diffuse variations of this concept that exist in contemporary discourse. Brady explains that while the sublime has become "outmoded" in many disciplines, the fundamental principles of the Romantic sublime remain central to contemporary esthetic, artistic, and philosophical discourses (2–3). In postwar Japan, with its global turn, Romanticism has come to exert a powerful influence on the creative arts. Susan Napier asserts that Miyazaki's works express visuals that verge on the "textbook definition of the sublime," an illustration of Japan's close engagement with European art and literary traditions (*Miyazakiworld* 18, 192). The Romantic sublime is therefore employed in this article as it maps so closely to Miyazaki's creative philosophy and provides a suitable theoretical framework for studying this figure's expansive filmography within the historical context of postwar Japan.

While the focus on this paper is the Romantic sublime, it is necessary to consider how the sublime has been shaped within the Japanese context. Japan experienced its own Romantic movement (*Nihon Romanha*) following the end of the *Bakumatsu* period in the mid-nineteenth century. Reaching its peak in the early 1900s, Japanese Romanticism drew upon the ideals of its European counterpart (particularly the German model) in an attempt to construct a form of national identity during a period when both the state and society were undergoing modernization. Populist interpretations of nationhood and national identity were championed by individuals who were attracted to Romanticism and it was these figures who established a form of Romantic nationalism for Japan (Doak 78). In this period, Romanticism was already a global-orientated movement and the Japanese Romantics drew upon traditions that suited their own national objectives (Kaffen 4). Writers such as Miyazaki Murryu, Komuro Angaido, and Koda Rohan, were among some of the major Romantic nationalist writers, rising to prominence with the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement in the 1880s, while also defining the style of modern Japanese literature (Kurita 9–11).

Japanese Romanticism took a decisively different turn in the postwar era, with many scholars hesitant to engage with anything too ideological or political. There was little critical work undertaken until the 70s when Japanese scholars revived the study of Romanticism, linking this to the prevailing contemporary sentiments of aspiration or yearning (Okada 62–3). This revival was inspired by the "Japanese Economic Miracle," and the political and social context of the postwar era. This reading of Romanticism would soon shift though, becoming more concerned about the challenges that the Japanese people currently faced. Over the past few decades, this engagement with Romanticism has continued to gain momentum. In the face of the perceived failings of modern society – overindustrialization, collectivism, and widespread disillusionment –

traditional Romantic notions have been embraced by many contemporary Japanese artists and writers. Shintoism – with its unique spiritual connection to nature – also comfortably accommodates Romantic conceptions of the natural sublime, thereby providing a cultural model for the adaptation of European ideals. As Kaffen argues, Japanese postwar Romanticism sought to “reveal the world beyond mediation [...] as spirit, will, genius, the absolute, the infinite” (1–3). Miyazaki embodies many of these postwar attitudes to Romanticism. It is thus in this post-modern landscape that Miyazaki’s works became “part of [a] national debate in Japan during the 1970s through the 1990s (and, indeed arguably, from the Meiji period opening to the West) about what it means to be Japanese in an increasingly global world” (Napier, “Confronting Master Narratives” 474). As it was for the earlier Romantic writers, themes of cultural identity became central to modern Japanese Romanticism and profoundly shaped artistic expression in the late 20th century. Miyazaki’s films therefore develop out of, and reflect, this Japanese postwar engagement with Romanticism.

The concept of the sublime first gained significant traction with Baroque art and literature in the 17th century. Although, its incorporation into artistic criticism was only fully realized through the translation of the 1st century Greek work *De Sublimitate* (*On the Sublime*) by French poet and critic Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux in 1674. This text was concerned with esthetics and literary criticism, positing that the sublime was a state of being that an individual should aspire toward. It existed as a state of extreme emotion and ecstasy, conveyed through powerful artistic expression. Edmund Burke’s 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, characterized the sublime as a state of intensified emotion that transcended the surface level of reality. In its German incarnation, *das Erhabene*, the sublime was more of a social affect related to the overcoming of melancholy (Koster ix). However, this definition was largely overtaken by the English estheticism that Burke established, as exemplified in the works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In his 1773 essay, *Von Deutscher Baukunst*, the sublime was described as a state of esthetic perfection found in nature that humans could emulate. Goethe understood humans as subject to the greater harmony of nature, able to peer into her secrets and produce “Genius” (Powers 49). He also challenged the displaced personal subjectivity present in the German tradition, redefining *das Erhabene* by incorporating the esthetic notions of the Burkean sublime (Koster, 39). Hence, the sublime continued to develop as a multifaceted concept across a number of traditions and cultures.

Immanuel Kant elaborated on the Burkean definition in his 1790 text, *The Critique of Judgement*, by linking the sublime to the power of the human imagination and thereby incorporating the esthetic sense into his moral philosophy. The natural world, seemingly infinite in beauty and wonder, thus emerged as the logical catalyst for the sublime; this concept permeating all through Romantic philosophy and developing as a defining characteristic of the movement (McKusick 13). As expressed in Kant’s definition, it is not nature itself that holds the sublime, but rather humanity’s relationship with this natural realm (Vine 2). The natural and human worlds therefore share an almost sacred bond in Romantic thought, this relationship cited as the source of artistic inspiration. Within both English and German Romantic philosophy, the sublime further developed into a state or experience beyond reality, encapsulating the ability of the imagination to draw inspiration from nature and give birth to new forms of creative expression. William

Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake, along with individuals from the “second generation” of English Romantics like Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and John Keats, offered variations of this concept while still embracing the core Kantian definition. There are in fact many different sublimities in Romanticism, yet these variations all share a fundamental engagement with the natural, the spiritual, and transcendent experiences of creative expression.

Moving forward to the present, the Romantic sublime emerges as a central element of Miyazaki’s creative philosophy. Miyazaki’s filmography presents a unique interpretation of the Romantic sublime, blending together elements of the English and German movements. He does not seem to adhere to any particular definition of the sublime; rather, he presents a broad understanding that draws on many different esthetic, artistic, and philosophical interpretations. Miyazaki’s presentation of this concept is very much a modern one, shaped by two centuries worth of scholarship on Romanticism and tempered by his historical context. Miyazaki’s sublime, while drawing heavily from such Romantic themes as artistic transcendence, the Romantic hero, and naturalism, is also underlined by modern sentiments. The most notable of these sentiments is feminism, which actually runs counter to many Romantic ideals. A number of Romantic writers (Burke for example) defined the sublime as masculine in nature but Miyazaki’s sublime is not specifically gendered. Because of this, the sublime as presented in the films of Studio Ghibli is not as narrowly defined as its Romantic variations. It is decidedly more permeable, reflecting upon all the previous incarnations that have come before it. Accordingly, this paper outlines how the sublime has been adapted from its Romantic origins and defined within the framework of Miyazaki’s creative philosophy.

3. The magical sublime

Miyazaki’s presentation of wondrous creative expression throughout his filmography is deeply embedded within the Romantic tradition of the “magical sublime.” In English Romanticism, magic was invoked as license for the powers of the “composing imagination” (Covino 71). This interpretation of the sublime cast language as an animating and magical force capable of enacting spiritual transcendence through the act of creative expression. As Anya Taylor outlines, magic became a prominent metaphor for Romantic writers, both as a symbol of “living” spiritual power and as a means to illustrate the relationship between humans and the natural realm (16–17). Many Romantic figures subscribed to the Neoplatonist conception of natural magic, which posited that power and energy were drawn from the environment. Neoplatonism had been revived by the Romantics as a reaction to prevailing Enlightenment opinions and the perceived trappings of modern technologies, providing a philosophical foundation for their own cause (Quinney 412). In this incarnation of Neoplatonism, magic – and by extension creative thought – was performed by tapping into energies circulating beyond the material bounds of reality. This type of magic was a means to unify humans with the natural, infusing the material world with magical wonder (Sasser 63). This conception of magic also maps closely to the philosophy of the “magical imagination” that developed into a central theme in many Romantic works. Coleridge advocated the inert magical ability of the human imagination, relating this to his theory of the “supernatural self” (Taylor 64–65). Wordsworth also wrote extensively on the sublime and its relationship to

humanity. As he explained in his fragmentary 1811 essay, *The Sublime and the Beautiful*, the mind could not fully comprehend the sublime on a purely conscious level: the mind attempts “to grasp at something towards which it can make approaches but which it is incapable of attaining” (356). In reaching out to the natural realm, Wordsworth wrote, an individual loses their self and, in the process, enters into communion with the magical sublime.

Miyazaki largely adheres to this Romantic interpretation of magic and the sublime, with his films presenting these two concepts as synonymous with creative energy. In Miyazaki’s artistic philosophy, imagination appears to be the primary guiding force of magic with his characters seemingly having access to the invisible realm underneath the surface of reality. As Cavallaro posits, “In granting his characters the capacity to bring about magical phenomena – a power they often have unbeknownst to the them – the director suggests that all imaginative human beings, not just born wizards and witches, are drawn to their invisible as their ultimate treasurehouse” (*Hayao Miyazaki’s World Picture*, 26). In a similar manner to Coleridge, Miyazaki asserts that the ability to engage with the creative sublime lies in the deeper part of the human psyche. In a 2002 interview, he described his creative process as such: “My way is not to use logic. I try to dig deep into the well of my subconscious. At a certain moment in that process, the lid is opened and very different ideas and visions are liberated” (in *Mes* n. pag.). A direct indication of this sentiment can be seen in *Hauru no Ugoku Shiro (Howl’s Moving Castle)* – adapted from the 1986 fantasy novel by Diane Wynne Jones. In this adaptation, Miyazaki builds on the magical realist aspects present in the source material. Because of this, *Howl’s Moving Castle* offers a valuable insight into Miyazaki’s interpretation of the magical sublime. As this film establishes, magic is synonymous with creative energy and inherent to humanity with the titular character – the enigmatic magician Howl – representative of this. Howl’s interaction with the wondrous world around him frames magic as a means of creative self-expression, only limited by his imagination. Howl’s treatment of magic in the film is that of an imaginative contribution to the making of reality; essentially a conduit through which creativity can be born (Cavallaro, *Hayao Miyazaki’s World Picture*, 28). Magic is thus depicted in *Howl’s Moving Castle* as a metaphoric representation of the imagination, able to tap into the sublime that exists beyond the material realm.

While characters like the wizard Howl directly illustrate how Miyazaki conceptualizes magic in his films, there is much that can be said about how his own protagonists interact with this magical sublime framework. *Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro)*, released in 1988, is perhaps one of the best examples on how Miyazaki conceptualizes magic and the wondrous natural realm. *My Neighbor Totoro* focuses on two young girls as they move to the countryside for the sake of their sick mother (based on the personal experiences of Miyazaki himself). In this environment, Mei and her older sister Satsuki are confronted with the realm of the supernatural; best epitomized in the forest creatures of the *totoro*. Critics have suggested that this supernatural realm is merely the imagination of the young girls, a testament to the limitless expression that is present in children (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 157). To this effect, the fantastical events of the film: the first glimpse of spirits when entering the new house, the discovery of the *totoro* realm in the woods, the magical seed-raising dance of the forest creatures, and the ride on the infamous “catbus” to find the missing Mei, can all be viewed as a coping mechanism of sorts that allows the children to deal with the great psychological challenges facing them.

As *My Neighbor Totoro* establishes, imagination is not only a means of furthering oneself but also a means of empowerment against the harsh realities of life. The film has a simple premise: the two girls seeking magic in the everyday world (McCarthy 137). Mei and Satsuki's connection with the natural world is one of the fundamental themes of the film and it is this relationship that allows them to find solace from the realities of their situation. *My Neighbor Totoro* demonstrates that magic and the sublime can be accessed through the natural world but suggests that a certain type of emotional state is required to do so; this state "perhaps best epitomized in the figure of a young girl" (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 161). *My Neighbor Totoro* stands out in Miyazaki's filmography as most definitively capturing the creative power of children, emphasizing his conception of the ideal Romantic hero and the connection that this figure shares with the magical sublime. This link is paramount to understanding how Miyazaki's conceptualizes and presents the Romantic sublime in his films.

The Oscar winning *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*) also communicates this theme of humanity possessing an inherent form of magic. Chihiro, the protagonist, is initially presented as a timid young girl but once she is thrust into the spirit world and has her name stripped from her (becoming known as Sen) she finds an inner determination previously unbeknownst to her. As in *My Neighbor Totoro*, the fantasy world that Chihiro is thrust into allowed her to overcome her own flaws and insecurities. In the fantastical realm presented in *Spirited Away*, Miyazaki suggests that only the imagination can allow humanity to rise above the inadequacies of modern society (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 183). The magical entities she encounters are vestiges of the sublime esthetic: Shinto gods and deities that have been stripped of their former power due to the corruption of our modern, industrialized society (Freiberg n. pag.). These *kami* (be it an animal spirit or a more powerful river god) represent a particular aspect of the natural realm and therefore the sublime. By restoring their power and reconnecting with the natural realm that these deities embody, Chihiro is also able to realize her inner potential. Miyazaki's treatment of magic and the fantastical is thus largely metaphoric, drawing from the literary traditions of Romantic ideology and the concept of the magical, imaginative sublime.

4. The sublime and the romantic hero

In presenting the wonders of the magical sublime on screen, Miyazaki's protagonists function as the conduit through which this transcendental experience is realized. With this, Miyazaki invokes the close relationship between the Romantic sublime and the literary tradition of the Romantic hero. The Romantic hero emerged as an idealized figure of artistic creation, simultaneously developing as a noble and tortured character archetype that rallied against cultural norms. Due to the fallibility of humanity, this interpretation of the sublime was predicated on profound emotional experiences and moments of awe and terror. Therefore, the Romantic hero archetype was closely attuned to the underlying primal energy of nature and could thus draw upon pools of creative inspiration that few individuals were capable of. While drawing inspiration from this archetype, Miyazaki's Romantic hero is so often embedded in a model of childhood and adolescence. As Cavallaro asserts, Miyazaki understanding of childhood is one of a "transhistorical, collective state" in which the child is a "repository of special faculties" that allows them to tap into a form of creative

power that is lost in the transition to adulthood (Cavallaro, *Hayao Miyazaki's World Picture*, 29). This form of the Romantic hero seems to echo William Blake's Romantic model of innocence. In the first half of the 1789 collection of poems, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake presents childhood as a state of blissful innocence in harmony with nature, while also vulnerable to the harsh realities of the material world. In his 1795–5 essays, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller likewise posits that the ideal poetic state was to be found in the naivete of children. To Schiller, the naïve poet is able to connect and navigate through the natural realm in a manner that the “experienced” individual cannot. As is characteristic of Miyazaki, his use of Romantic concepts does not draw on any one philosophical, esthetic, or artistic model, but exists more as a consolidation of different English and German literary traditions.

This character archetype featured in so many of Miyazaki's works can thus be understood as his interpretation of the Romantic hero, manifesting as a child or adolescent. The Studio Ghibli protagonists examined in this paper are closely attuned to the creative energies of the natural realm, fashioned in the tradition of Romantic heroes. These characters are bestowed with a level of creative (youthful) intuition that allows them to engage with the natural world on a purely instinctive basis, enabling the impossible to become reality. Many of Miyazaki's films can thus be seen as his attempts to embody the creative spirit of childhood: “If, as artists, we try to tap into that soul level – if we say that life is worth living and the world is worth living in – then something good might come of it. Maybe that's what these films are doing. They are my way of blessing the child” (Miyazaki in Brooks n. pag.). It is through his disillusionment with modern society that youth, or rather the nostalgia for youth, becomes a sacred and transcendent experience. The boundless imagination of children is acknowledged by Miyazaki as the ideal state for artistic creation. In exploring the creative ingenuity of humans throughout his films, Miyazaki therefore honors youth as the ideal period of creative expression and the idealized state in which one can reach out and experience the sublime.

In this model of the Romantic hero, Miyazaki invokes the imagination and sense of enchantment attributed to adolescence, and links this to a sentiment of boundless possibility. This notion of limitless possibility is often tempered by a feminine sensibility. Miyazaki constantly attempts to subvert traditional generic tropes in his films, portraying females (usually young girls) in the roles that would usually be filled by males. His protagonists are often girls on the cusp of womanhood that are confronted with the reality of conforming to societal norms and conventions. Through this, their childlike sense of innocence and wonder are challenged by their burgeoning adulthood. The young females in Miyazaki's films can be understood as conduits through which the promise of magical alternatives are mediated and communicated with the audience, allowing them to imaginatively participate in the vision that he has created (Cavallaro, *The Late Works of Hayao Miyazaki*, 154). These characters can be considered as “youths wearing *shōjo* (girl) masks” as they display behavior common to both traditional gender roles (in Eureka n. pag). Miyazaki's female protagonists are thus a combination of both feminine and masculine attributes, representing an idealized view of childhood and adolescence. In this sense, Miyazaki's Romantic hero emerges from the Romantic “expressivity view” of the artist as a conduit for creative inspiration, rather than strictly as a specific personality (Day 49).

In illustrating the relationship between the Romantic hero and the sublime, Miyazaki frequently employs the visual and thematic metaphor of flight. Romantic artists had

a distinctive habit of characterizing their selves as eagles or other winged creatures, and Miyazaki's fascination with flight thus follows in this tradition (Ferber 7). The flight scenes in Studio Ghibli films are projected against horizons of endless blues and lush clouds, giving full sensation to the weightlessness of these motions. Miyazaki's animation techniques thereby evoke awe and wonder at a world whose vastness and depth are somehow ungraspable (LaMarre 62). Napier argues that the motif of flight – along with all the associated connotations of the act – has a deeper meaning for Miyazaki's protagonists (*Anime from Akira* 168). Flight often provides the viewer with a brief glimpse at the “true” nature of a character, as both the inner and outer journeys of Miyazaki's protagonists are mirrored in the visual image of flight (Osmond 60). Cavallaro notes that the director “often captures the frisson of flight in a more symbolic fashion by means of fantasy sequences, where flight is not dependent on contraptions, but rather on otherworldly phenomena” (*The Late Works of Hayao Miyazaki*, 143). LaMarre agrees with this point, forwarding that Miyazaki gives prominence to means of flight that rely on minimal technology. That is not to say that Miyazaki rejects technology as many of the Romantics did, but that he celebrates flying contraptions that act in complete unison with humans (61–2). To Miyazaki, flight is synonymous with imagination and creativity, a transcendence of personal limitations and a testament to the wonders of the imagination. It creates an ideal of “boundless possibility in which emotions, imagination, and sometimes even technology [...] combine to offer hope of a potentially attainable alternative world that transcends our own” (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 168). It is through flight that the sublime is articulated in Miyazaki's works, representing unbound possibilities and creative freedom.

One of Miyazaki's earliest works, *Kaze no Tani no Naushika* (*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*), presents the archetype for his many Romantic heroes. The character of Nausicaä, drawn from Homer's *Odyssey*, is essentially an amalgam of Eastern and Western mythological traditions, woven together to form a new mythology of sorts (DeWeese-Boyd 1). Nausicaä has also been a symbolic figure for many European Romantics, encapsulating the qualities that they sought to define their own Romantic heroes with. While embodying the imagery of the Homeric Nausicaä, Miyazaki's characterization is largely drawn from the heroine of the eleventh century fable *Mushi Meduru Hime-gimi* (*The Lady who Loved Insects*). The resulting figure is a subversion of the traditional *shōjo* archetype, the first of many empowered female protagonists for Miyazaki. However, Nausicaä is perhaps the outlier of Miyazaki's female leads. While appearing as a complex character, Nausicaä is a paragon of nobility and lacks the subtle characterization that Miyazaki establishes in his subsequent films. However, within the confines of this narrative – with its epic scale and heavy themes – her noble character is entirely fitting. In this sense, *Nausicaä* is very much a film of female empowerment with Miyazaki crafting a strong feminine character in a narrative form that has been traditionally male dominated. As evident of this: one of the visuals presented to the viewer in the very first moments of the film is a wide shot of the open sky with a glider soaring through the air, evoking a sense of power, freedom and limitless possibility (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 166). Nausicaä herself is a powerful symbol of this hope and can thus be understood as Miyazaki's modern archetype of the noble Romantic hero.

Conversely, *Majo no Takkyūbin* (*Kiki's Delivery Service*) provides a more nuanced examination of Miyazaki's model of the Romantic hero. *Kiki's Delivery Service* uses flight,

in both a literal and abstract sense, to explore the theme of childhood with much of the internal conflict of the film based around this concept. The plot involves a young witch moving to a seaside town to begin her training; marking her transition into adulthood and initiating a quest of self-discovery. The presence of magic in the world of this film draws its influences from traditional European folklore and fantasy, traditions that are increasingly coming into conflict with technological advancement and modernity. This is a pertinent example of Miyazaki's use of magical realist elements. Much of the film is concerned with Kiki attempting to rediscover her passion for magical flight, a metaphor for creative ambition. Like the frustrated artist trope in Romantic literature, Kiki must undergo a journey of personal development to regain her talent. Flight, as McCarthy asserts, is a metaphor with a triple purpose in *Kiki's Delivery Service* – for independence, for the loneliness of being different, and also for talent of any kind (157). Kiki is thereby depicted as a somewhat different form of Romantic hero from *Nausicaä*: demonstrating the same noble characteristics yet facing inner demons rather than tangible ones. Her journey is a reflection of the anxieties facing young people today, while also a celebration of the inner strength that humanity possesses. Such struggles are integral to his depiction of the Romantic hero, with *Nausicaä* and Kiki emerging as two different interpretations of this character archetype.

5. The sublime in natural and romantic landscapes

In his visuals of boundless horizons or with the awe-inspiring beauty of forests and waterways, Miyazaki mediates humanity's experience of the sublime through nature. Miyazaki's ecological philosophy illustrates a close engagement with Romantic philosophies of nature and these ideals profoundly shape his artistic expression. In comparison to the other variations of the sublime presented in this paper, this model of the sublime is primarily concerned with the spiritual as mediated through the material, natural realm. The understanding of nature within traditional Romantic discourse is quite broad in scope but Miyazaki's draws specifically on sentiments of spirituality and nostalgia (McKusick 414). Nature existed as a manifestation of the divine (whatever form this may take) in Romanticism, with the sublime encapsulating this essence. The relationship between humanity and nature therefore emerged as a deeply spiritual union in the Romantic tradition. Miyazaki presents nature as a divinely inspired realm, intrinsically linked with the spiritual origins of humanity and the magical sublime. The treatment of creative thought in the films of Studio Ghibli is often framed through Miyazaki's environmental ideals – humanity's connection with nature depicted as the source of artistic and creative inspiration. Miyazaki's naturalism is heavily influenced by the historical ecological narrative of Sasuke Nishio, who hypothesized that the dense evergreen oak forests of the *Jomon* period were sustainable enough for humans and animals to co-exist in relative peace (Mayumi et al. 2). To Miyazaki, these forests are a buried archetypal memory for the Japanese, an ancient spiritual force intertwined with the national psyche (Napier, "Confronting Master Narratives" 484–5). This notion of peaceful co-existence with nature is one of the most prominent legacies of the Romantic period and it is significant that it remains as a central pillar of Miyazaki's worldview.

The presentation of the Romantic sublime in Miyazaki's natural landscapes is also shaped by notions of magical realism. Like Romanticism, magical realism is also a term

that is difficult to define. It primarily denotes a “realistic” world where strange and magical phenomenon manifest. The Romantic sublime has a central place within magical realism in that it presents the natural realm as the appropriate location of transcendence (Sasser 54–55). Natural landscapes can thus be identified as gateways to the supernatural, the point where the boundary between the materialistic and spiritual realm becomes blurred. It is through the magical reality of Miyazaki’s worlds that the sublime is filtered. Miyazaki’s animated worlds emerge from the dissolution of one another, with many of his films using this transition as a metaphor for personal journeys or acts of transformation (Napier, *Anime from Akira* 156). Each of Miyazaki’s films are able to make the fantastical seem plausible, presenting landscapes that emerge fully formed through a combination of imaginative constructions and careful attention to verisimilitude: the “immediate area between in which the fictional and imaginary combine” (Nemoianu 298). Andrew Osmond, using animation historian Giannalberto Bendazzi’s distinction, asserts that Miyazaki’s work tends to copy reality rather than existing as plausible impossibility (Osmond 59; Bendazzi 65). Many of Miyazaki’s worlds are therefore recognizable as an amalgamation of many real-world contexts, blended with the fantastical so as to create a unique setting. In Miyazaki’s filmography, *Kiki* and *Totoro* are the most pertinent examples of magical realism. With these two films, the boundary between realism and magic is decisively blurred, creating tension and allowing Miyazaki to creatively address real world issues and highly conceptualized philosophical notions. While these films are set against a fantastical backdrop, they remain grounded in reality as the ordeals that the characters face are representative of the many challenges that humans face in their lifetime.

To this effect, the films of Studio Ghibli demonstrate an uncanny ability to encapsulate the magic and small moments of wonder in everyday life. These films are renowned for these particular moments which stand out from the conventional milieu of Japanese and Western animations. These quiet periods in which the characters are seemingly just standing around and taking in the scenery, accompanied only by natural sounds or minimal scoring, allows the audience to imagine their selves in the context of the film. Carbullido interprets these scenes through the esthetic concept of “aware”: a meeting point where Japanese spirituality and esthetics converge, enabling communion between the human world and the world of the divine (65). This concept maps closely to how the sublime has been characterized in this paper. When Mei and Satsuki are exploring the forest beyond their new house in the early stages of *My Neighbor Totoro*, the scene settles on the serene image of a softly flowing brook. This scene does not advance the plot, but it forces the audience to simply enjoy the innate beauty of the moment on its own. In instances like these, Miyazaki seems to be explicitly drawing our attention to the magic of everyday life and the fleeting moments of transcendence that emerges from said occurrences. This in itself is blurring the conventional conflict between reality and fantasy, encouraging viewers to embrace the beauty present all around them (Cavallaro, *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki* 6). Kant would consider this moment “beautiful” rather than the sublime, “the sublime touches, the beautiful charms,” but Miyazaki seems to conflate these two categories into a broader understanding of this concept (16). As has been illustrated throughout this paper, Miyazaki’s interpretation and use of Romantic concepts encompasses a number of different English and German variations, filtered through the lens of his postwar Japanese context.

This Japanese context is fundamental to the spirituality of Studio Ghibli films. The Romantic sublime was explicitly shaped by religious and spiritual notions and this is echoed in Miyazaki's own creative philosophy (Nemoianu 393). Even though Miyazaki's films are constructs of both Eastern and Western culture, traditional elements of Japanese culture are firmly ingrained within all Studio Ghibli productions. The presentation of Japanese spirituality in Miyazaki's films is exemplified in his visual and thematic depiction of *kami*. Within Shintoism, *kami* refers to spirits or divine beings that are personifications of nature or the dead. Every sentient and non-sentient being embodies *kami*, linking humans and the spiritual realm with one another. From the bizarre array of minor deities in *Spirited Away*, to the playful *totoro* of *My Neighbor Totoro*, and with the powerful forest spirits of *Mononoke-hime* (*Princess Mononoke*), Miyazaki's full creative talents are on display in bringing these divine beings into motion. There are indeed striking similarities in how Miyazaki frames *kami* and the Romantic sublime. For instance, the expression *kannagara no michi* (way of the gods) means to be in harmony with the spiritual world and this is a philosophy deeply rooted within European Romanticism. In drawing from the Romantic sublime, Miyazaki also infuses it with understandings of Shintoism, thereby creating a composite of both. Bigelow asserts that this a belief system that "is reclaimed by Miyazaki as a kind of metaphysics of historical materialism that enables him to articulate a morality of respect for the Other, both human and non-human, without being bound by dogmatic or culturally specific moral absolutes" (57). Therefore, Miyazaki's depiction of *kami* underlines his interpretation of the Romantic sublime.

Princess Mononoke stands as the definitive example of *kami* and Japanese spirituality within Miyazaki's films. Here, Miyazaki presents a revisionist national mythology for the Japanese people as shaped by traditional Shinto beliefs. The semantic meaning behind this film's title alone highlights Miyazaki's engagement with spirituality. *Mononoke*, as a term, is an expression of the primordial untamed energy existing in the world, and thus has strong parallels with the Romantic sublime (Papp 40). Furthermore, *Mononoke-hime* can also be directly translated to "possessed princess," referring to the deep spiritual connection between the character San and the spirit world (Whitley 12). In particular, the thematic aspects of *Princess Mononoke* conveys Miyazaki's engagement with naturalism and spirituality. This film carries a powerful warning about humanity's retreat from their naturalized and spiritual origins, establishing a dichotomy between the expanding human cities of the late *Muromachi* period and the *kami* of the forests. By encroaching on the natural landscape with their iron structures and firearms, humans are depicted as abandoning their own connection with nature. In this sense, the destruction of nature is also the destruction of the human soul (Bigelow 89). The forests of this film are depicted as flourishing with spiritual life, such as the enigmatic tree-dwelling *kodami* and the awe-inspiring *Shishigami* (Great Forest Spirit). One of the key scenes of *Princess Mononoke* focuses on the Great Forest Spirit striding slowly through the forest, flowers blooming under its feet with each step before dying away just as quickly. In this one scene, the animation perfectly encapsulates the beauty and deeply spiritual power of nature as articulated in this creature: a literal incarnation of the natural. As such, the *kami* of Miyazaki's films can be read as explicit metaphoric and visual expressions of his Romantic ideals concerning spirituality, nature, and the sublime.

Miyazaki's spiritual engagement with the natural world can also be seen in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*. *Nausicaä* is among one of Studio Ghibli's most visually distinctive productions, perhaps the most striking depiction of the sublime within a natural landscape. In *Nausicaä*, Miyazaki effectively creates a natural world that is simultaneously strange and familiar, and this unique environment is continually placed in focus. For instance, the first five minutes of the film are almost purely esthetic with only a few lines of dialogue spoken; the protagonist's face almost totally concealed by a breathing apparatus. Here, the audience shares the awe of this solitary figure traversing through the depths of an immense, otherworldly forest (Osmond 65). At many points during this scene the figure pauses to take in the beauty of her surroundings, another example of what Sherri Carbullido (2013) would describe as the "aware" moment. More so, this environment is the very embodiment of the Romantic conception of a magical natural landscape. The forests of this world teem with otherworldly life and vibrant poisonous plants that are animated with such intricate detail, depicting a seemingly alien yet perfectly natural ecological system. However, despite this initial impression of strangeness, the plant and animal life present in the film move in a realistic fashion and are firmly grounded in the natural world (McCarthy 77). Thus, in *Nausicaä*, Miyazaki creates a landscape that transcends the materialistic world, existing as a location where the magical wonder of the sublime is able to be accessed and experienced.

Like *Princess Mononoke*, *Nausicaä* is primarily focused on the breakdown of relations between humanity and nature. What is different in this film is that *Nausicaä* highlights the dire spiritual and ecological consequences of this breakdown. Outside of the pockets of wondrous and densely populated toxic forests, the landscape of *Nausicaä* is largely barren and desolate. This is a post-apocalyptic world, affirming the central Romantic fear of the natural landscape disappearing into, and subsequently being destroyed by, a new world of industrialization and urbanization. Blake and Wordsmith, to name just a few Romantic figures, wrote extensively on this theme. Both "first generation" English Romantics rallied against the onslaught of technical innovation and urbanization taking place in Britain during the late 18th century. Blake's poem "London" in *Songs of Innocence and Experience* depicts a manmade landscape full of dreariness, where even the natural flow of the Thames is "charter'd" (2). Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned" presents a similar sentiment, bemoaning the corruption of the natural at the hands of humanity: "Our Meddling intellect/Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:-/We murder to dissect" (26–28). Miyazaki echoes these sentiments, with *Nausicaä* presenting human civilization as having destroyed itself and nature through their mistreatment of technology. However, the film does conclude on an idealistic note, with Nausicaä becoming a messiah figure of sorts: bridging the gap between humanity and nature. In this instance, Miyazaki elevates Nausicaä from a Romantic hero to a Romantic savior figure; one who is capable of reaffirming the balance between humans and nature. With *Nausicaä*, Miyazaki's engagement with spirituality and the natural is at its most idealistic, articulating many of the core elements of Miyazaki's creative philosophy and his interpretation of Romantic traditions.

6. Conclusion

As this paper has illustrated, Hayao Miyazaki's creative philosophy has been profoundly shaped by the literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions of European

Romanticism. Specifically, Miyazaki's engagement with Romanticism can be characterized by his interpretation of the Romantic sublime, a concept inherently linked to the Romantic traditions of the Romantic hero, the magical imagination, and the natural realm. This paper has committed to no single definition of the sublime, instead presenting it as a product of artistic and philosophical exchanges across different cultures and time periods. This approach has been necessary as Miyazaki does not commit to a single definition. Rather, he embodies the *spirit* of the Romantic sublime. His filmography draws upon prominent aspects of both the English and German Romantic movements, while also being shaped by the cultural conditions of his own time. The films discussed in this paper all provide insight into how Miyazaki has articulated these Romantic traditions within his own creative philosophy. In studying these films through a conceptual framework of the Romantic sublime, it has been possible to more accurately reflect upon this creative philosophy and how Miyazaki conceptualizes the act of artistic expression.

What has also become apparent in this paper is that Miyazaki is a Romantic figure in his own right. His understanding of nature and creative expression are strikingly similar to the underlying philosophies of English and German Romanticism and, either consciously or not, Romantic themes continue to characterize his work. Through his films, the Romantic incarnation of the sublime continues to resonate and provide meaning to the pressing issues of modernity. From his nearly three-decade role as the creative and artistic director of Studio Ghibli, Hayao Miyazaki has developed a filmography that projects a fully developed creative philosophy. It is entirely fitting that through the medium of animation – perhaps the ultimate form of unbridled creative expression – that Miyazaki chose to dedicate his life to; his accomplishments in this arena ensuring that he will be remembered as one of the greats of world cinema.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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